

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Living In Perhaps

Julia Widdows

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LIVING IN PERHAPS

Julia Widdows



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For my parents,
who knew the value of education

Names

Cora Eileen. Such an ugly name.

I can't believe it's mine.

I couldn't believe it was me they were talking about when they read that out in court. I wanted to shout *There's been a mistake!* Maybe I did make some kind of noise. I certainly heard a ringing in my ears. But perhaps that was just the shock.

You see, I'd always thought I was Carol Ann.

Cora Eileen. My real name, my true name.

The name my mother gave me.

I'm adopted. I didn't know that until I was sixteen. I never dreamed it. Of course, I *did* dream, like an kid, that underneath this too, too ordinary exterior I was really a foreign princess; that my parents, fleeing execution at the hands of the mob, had entrusted me as a baby to this simple childless couple, and that – one day – all would be revealed and I'd come into my rightful inheritance. Castles, and white horses, and more money than could easily be spent. But I reckon that's par for the course when you're nine years old and you've already downed too many fairy tales.

I've got a younger brother, Brian. I never dreamed *he* was adopted. He was much too boring to be anything but theirs.

They never told me I'd been adopted when I was growing up. It wasn't *the done thing*, then, to let your little ones in on the family secrets. I always thought we were flesh of their flesh. My mother sprang it on me when I was much older. Saved it up as a present for my sixteenth birthday. But she never told me what my real name was. Maybe even *she* thought that would be a bit much.

It's so important, what you're called. It colours everything. 'Name, please?' some complete stranger asks, and you have to own up. School is the worst place. They call your name out, they tick it off in registers, they make you write it on all your books, and it's there, sewn into every bit of uniform, for anyone to find. And if you've got a stupid name or one that sounds like a rude word, everybody hears it, and the smirking, snickering rumour of it runs round like wildfire. Higginbottom. Sucksmith. Lipshitz. There's no escape. I don't know how the parents let it happen. Why don't they change it by deed poll, swap it for something less visible? I can see that people might feel strongly about *the family name*. But who needs to hang on to a family heirloom, a great tradition, like Raper or Boggs?

I was Carol Burton. It was all right. It could have been better, but it could have been a hell of a lot worse. At my school, it was a mid-range sort of name. It wasn't as classy as Suzannah Grey or Natasha Maynard. But it wasn't nearly as bad as Suki Wooster. Sooki Wooster. Or Mildred Clark, which made you think of a hundred-year-old charwoman.

But Carol Ann Burton – I wonder why my parents didn't get round to making it official? Why they left me on the record as Cora Eileen? I know they're the sort of people who aren't confident with paperwork, who don't like to *bother* anyone official, but even so. What did they think would happen? That I'd sail unruffled through life and never find out?

It's quite clever, really. Coraeileen, Carolann. Slurring the names together, letting them slip into something else. I guess they wanted to change it, yet they didn't want to stray too far from what I'd been used to.

I've done that. I've slurred my name, let the sounds slide together: Carol-Ann, Carolann, Carolyn. Because Carolyn is a much prettier name. Someone called Carolyn would be dainty and attractive. Her pure white kneesocks would always stay up. She'd have a pretty young mother who shared her tastes, who'd pay for her to go to ballet classes and drive her there in a pale-blue sports car. A Carolyn would have a feminine sort of bedroom, with billowing curtains and a princess-and-the-pea bed. And she'd have loads of friends, other pretty girls with shiny hair and nice manners and gracious homes.

Sometimes with new people I tried to let them think my name was Carolyn. Not Carol Ann. And now I find out it's really Cora Eileen.

Brian got to stay Brian. He didn't have an alias.

Every week at home I used to read the obituaries in the local paper, searching for someone who had died of something interesting, or spectacularly young. I began to notice that often the older ones had mysterious pseudonyms in brackets. You'd see 'Ayling, Ronald Arthur (Pip), in his eighty-third year, beloved husband of ...' or 'Pope, Doris, née Mottram (Kitty), aged seventy-six, widow of ...' And further in, after all the grieving relatives have had a mention and the name of the cats' home, donations in memory of to be sent to, it would say: 'Further enquiries to J & S Brewer, Fnrld Drs, High Street.' And sometimes I'd be tempted to make further enquiries, to telephone J & S Brewer, Fnrld Drs and ask them if they knew why the late Ronald Arthur Ayling was known to his friends as Pip, or why Kitty Pope, Kitty Mottram as was, forsook the name of Doris. I have always been curious. I have an absolute thirst for knowledge. It's the only thing worth having.

My dad's first name was William – letters always came addressed to Mr W. Burton – but everyone called him Ted. I never knew why, and it wasn't the sort of family where you could casually ask. They were great at let's pretend. Let's pretend that what you see is what you get.

We weren't adopted from birth. I would have been five, and Brian four, when they got us from the children's home. I imagine it was always hard to shift brothers and sisters. Who'd want a ready-made family, when what you truly wanted was a family you'd made yourself? And I'm talking about the days when perfect white babies could be got at birth, if you were a hungry adoptive couple, with faulty tubes or faulty sperm, with a marriage certificate and your own house, preferably church-goers, within a certain age bracket. Babies were yours for the picking, like fruit off a tree. Nobody much wanted older kids, or black babies, or children with handicaps. And since they could get a flawless white baby with no bad habits, why should they?

It was 1960, the year they picked us. As adoptive parents, perhaps they were a bit too old, or a bit too poor, or perhaps they didn't have the right people to give them references. They certainly were on the old side, so maybe they wanted their instant family straight away. Or maybe we were a bargain. Buy

one, get one free. They could have dug in their heels, hung on for a *tabula rasa*, a little unetched baby with a windy smile. But how long would that take? So we were what they got: one of each, slightly worn, five and four.

I don't remember any of this. All I know is what I've been told. Like being given the corners of a jigsaw puzzle and being expected to fill in the rest by yourself. Or, more likely, leave it at that: be satisfied with the corners and never mind the picture in the middle.

And now I find that I didn't even know my own name. My own name, the one I started out with. If only they had bothered to change it officially, I would never have had to hear it called out like that, so incriminatingly, in court.

Think of how it must look, on a report, a lengthy official one, pages and pages of it, full of the judgements of worthy, highly qualified people, about the background and character of its subject. And the subject's name in big black letters at the top: Cora Eileen Burton. Now, how would that look? Wouldn't you start to think, straight away, before you'd even read it: *Cora Eileen, she sounds a hard-faced sort of creature?* She sounds like the type who'd be guilty. Who dunnit.

A Happy Childhood

I've been talking to someone recently. In here. *Here's* another story. I'll get round to that one, in my own good time.

She came into my room without knocking. You have to keep your door open, here, during the day. She just tapped on the door, firmly, as if to say, 'I'm here, but I'm coming in whether you like it or not,' and then she was in. She sat down straight away, without asking if I minded.

'Hello. My name's Lorna. I'd like to talk to you.'

What she meant was 'I'd like *you* to talk to *me*.'

I don't care for all this first-name-terms stuff. It's supposed to make everything feel relaxed and informal, but it just makes me more suspicious. I'd rather she said, 'My name's Dr Smith,' or whatever. They don't give you a chance to find out anything about them, not even their place in the pecking order. What are they hiding? A long and distinguished career in psychotherapy is my guess.

They think that if they get you to call them Lorna, or Mike, or Trudy, you'll slip into thinking they're only a nurse or a trainee and you'll say something more revealing than if you thought you were talking to a psychiatrist or a social worker. And they kid themselves that they're being egalitarian and all-pals-together. That they're not patronizing us. But I'd like to know exactly who they are. I'd like to see the framed certificates, please.

So Lorna smiled and put her hands together in her lap and looked encouraging, and I just sat there. I wasn't going to make it easy for her. She was going to have to *squeeze* each little drop out of me.

We both waited.

'I thought we could have a bit of a chat.'

I shrugged.

'Why don't you tell me something about yourself? We could start with where you live. Your home.'

Well, I wasn't going to fall for that.

I'd much rather have chatted about something interesting. I'd rather have talked about *anything* other than me. What came to mind was Louisa May Alcott, and the bit where Jo March cuts off her hair. I'd found the book on the window sill in my room, tucked behind the curtain. I don't know if it had been hidden or just left there, forgotten. I didn't care – it was something to read, and I was already halfway through. So I smiled brightly at good old Lorna and I said, 'Have you ever read *Little Women*?'

I must say I enjoyed watching her reaction. Various expressions chased each other round her face, until finally one overwhelmed the others and her features settled down into a simulacrum of *patient interest*. She thought she could wait. Hear me out, then pin me down.

But I ran her ragged. All round the houses we went, never touching home. Round the rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran. I'll say.

So – oh, Lorna, die for this! – I had a happy childhood. Happy enough. Let me start by describing our home.

Whatever they say about it now, I don't remember the children's home. As far as I'm concerned, I have always lived in the same house, the same little bungalow with rectangular gardens, back and front. Two parents, Mum and Dad, two children, Carol and Brian. Our mum and dad have names, too. They are called Edie and Ted, but we don't call them that. In fact, whenever I hear another adult – invariably an aunt or uncle – call them by their first names, I get a little squeeze of fright. Who dares to be so familiar, so intimate? And who dares to forget that, really, who they are is *Mum* and *Dad*?

There is a garage, and a car which he drives, she doesn't. There are no pets over a certain size. There are weekdays, when he works, and weekends, when he doesn't. He works at *the firm*. I don't know what it does, and I don't know what he does there. It is called Gough Electricals, but that still doesn't shed much light. She used to be a bookkeeper there, but now she doesn't go out to work. Now – in the long elastic present I'm referring to, my childhood and life so far.

For Brian and me, the days are mapped out by school and Sunday school. We are nothing if not well behaved. We're terribly well brought up. We wear the correct school uniforms, and satchels on our backs. Neither of us is bright enough to get a place at the grammar. I go to the girls' secondary modern, he goes to the boys'. We do homework, we are Cubs and Brownies, Scouts and Guides. We ride second-hand bikes.

Our home is set in a sea of bungalows. They're all very neat and tidy but with a somehow seedy air about them, like all those suburban streets whose inhabitants wish they were a little grander. They're pre-war, past their best – a bit like their owners. At the end of our road, right next door to us, there's an anomaly, a much older house, a spacious double villa left high and dry from an earlier age when the town hadn't crept this far. Tucked between hedges and trees, it hides away, ignoring the neighbours, trying to pretend we don't exist. Trying to pretend it's sailing alone through the fields, just like it used to. Whenever I walked home down our road, I wondered what it must have been like before the bungalows existed. A house right in the middle of nowhere, with the high road in the distance curving away across the fields; just the leaves rustling and cows tearing at the grass, no modern din of lawnmowers or transistor radios. Once or twice when I was playing outside I dared go as far as the front gate, crouching down and peeping through the bars at it: a fairytale house in bungalow-land.

But I'm not going there just yet. I'm staying away from that particular house.

The bungalows are L-shaped at the front, with a big bay window swathed in net curtains, because this was the main bedroom, and no one wants the postman or the milkman or the neighbours staring into their bedroom. The path from the front gate goes straight as an arrow to the front door, set in the corner of the L. Each front door has a rising sun or a sailing ship made out of stained glass in its window, and two more little windows either side to let some light into the hallway. The windows are always of frosted glass, to thwart prying eyes. In some of them you can see the outline of a pot plant, or a vase of flowers. If the flowers look especially healthy or brilliantly coloured, you can bet they're plastic. They're given away free with soap powder and petrol, and they look so real and last so well,

and, after all, are *so convenient*.

Because these houses are small and set all on one level, they're popular with retired people, or middle-aged couples whose children have grown up and gone, or couples who never had children. But our parents had children, in the end, and they needed to expand. A few of the bungalows expanded outwards, sticking on a sun-lounge, or a utility room to house the freezer and the washing machine. Ours expanded upwards, into an attic bedroom in the roof. This is my first taste of injustice.

Although he's fifteen months younger than me, Brian gets the bedroom in the roof. Even though it could be argued that he is more likely to trip on the stairs, or need help in the night for a nightmare or a wee – and it's true that he frequently wet the bed – or simply that he might like to be nearer Mum and Dad than I (being older) would, *he* gets given the room in the roof. He is a boy. Boys always get privileges, earned or not.

I have the smallest bedroom, the one right next to the garage. It's plain as a nun's cell, despite the eye-jangling wallpaper. A narrow bed, a single wardrobe, a small chest of drawers, all white-painted wood. A bookshelf with a few Enid Blytons and my Bible and prayer book. The only softening touches are the fluffy pyjama case on the bed, and a print on the wall of a puppy and a kitten sitting amicably together in a basket. The view from my window is the front path, the front gate, the hard standing for the car. Even so I used to spend a lot of time staring out of my bedroom window. I put my head under the net curtains to look out: I couldn't stand that film of nylon between my eyes and the outside world. 'You've been gawping out of this window again, haven't you?' my mother would say, tugging the curtains straight. As if looking out of a window was a crime. Well, it was fine to look out, but you mustn't be seen doing so.

My gazing wasn't strictly observational: it was the sort that cows do, looking soulfully into the middle distance while their jaws keep moving and sometimes their tails lift to let out squirts of dung. Gazing out provided a view for my imagination to rest on and blank out. Maybe that's just what cows are doing, stuck in the same old field, as they while away the dismal hours.

But I wanted to be up in the roof, under the sloping ceiling where model biplanes dangled. I wanted to be able to lie in bed and gaze out of the dormer window, over the roof tiles and the neat back gardens, to the low hills and greenness inland. There's a feeling, when you're up there, of being alone and complete, like being in a well-defended castle on a mound. As if you could pull up the ladder and shut the trapdoor and no one could come up unless you said so. But you can't. There's just an ordinary door and a steep flight of red-carpeted stairs leading down to the hall.

I don't think Brian could have cared less which room he had. He isn't an imaginative sort of boy. His talents lie firmly in the realm of the practical. He built model aeroplanes out of plastic kits and made stupid noises with his mouth as he flew them round in his hand, but I'm sure he didn't imagine anything other than 'Here is an aeroplane, flying along.'

We live near the coast, though you'd hardly know it. Eastwards, everything's so flat you can't see the sea at all. The horizon is a line of houses. Our road is right at the inland edge of the town. But the soil is full of sand, and the trees are the sort you get near the sea, stunted hawthorns and pine trees, growing in fixed, crouched positions, as if the wind never blows from any other direction.

We're near the main road out of town, and on summer weekends there's always a traffic jam, because

of the day trippers. They want their glimpse of the sea, and then when they've had enough they want to go home — all at the same time. ~~Hot and thirsty and sunburnt, with quarrelsome kids in the back.~~ Maybe they sit there in the stalled queue and look out of their car windows and wish they lived here, near the sea. Perhaps they catch a glimpse of Dad doing the garden or us on our bikes, and they wish they were us and not them, not stuck in the traffic with another fifty miles to go yet. I'd see kids with their sticky mouths pressed up against the windows, staring out at me, and I'd know they wanted to be me. Me astride my bike, with my suntanned legs and my chewing gum, and no one telling me to *for God's sake, sit still!*

Perhaps they did.

I've always found it too easy to think of *perhaps*, to live in perhaps. The perhaps of being a Carolyn, the perhaps of people who wished they were us. It's so tempting. So much better than real life.

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